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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a model for graduate student success and reports the results of a study of factors affecting the success of 40 first-year graduate students. Based on a review of the literature, a four-element model for graduate success was devised that focused on: (1) immersion in research activities; (2) academic regimen and planning; (3) social management; and (4) self-management. Based on interviews with 40 first-year graduate students from various departments in a research university, along with graduate directors and several advanced graduate students, the study found that departmental climate had a significant impact on the success of graduates students. It found that while most departments in the study sponsored one or two informal social events for incoming graduate students and faculty, the most successful department in the study sponsored 42, including a weekly dinner hosted by each faculty member. This department also helped foster interactions among the students, encouraged students to complete program requirements in a timely manner, and immersed students in research projects. Suggestions for helping departments improve the success rates of their graduate students are included. (Contains 28 references.) (MDM)

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The Structure of Good Beginnings:

The Early Experiences of Graduate Students

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Marriott Hotel, Orlando, Florida, November 2-5, 1995. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

The Early Experiences of Graduate Students

There remains a lot we need to learn about graduate school training. This is especially true given the estimates that place attrition rates at 40 to 50 percent for all students, 30 percent for prestigious National Science Foundation fellowship recipients, and 60 to 70 percent for African-American and Latino/a students (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Brown, Clewell, Ekstrom, Goertz, & Powers, 1994; Chapman & McCauley, 1993; Oliver & Brown, 1988; Sowell, 1989). While this situation has generated research on the graduate student experience, the early experiences of graduate students have been largely overlooked.

This presentation will address factors that could enhance the early experiences of graduate students. One thing you will notice throughout: we place a large part of the onus of responsibility on graduate departments and graduate schools to create environments and offer training programs. The goal is to support the timely completion of degrees for all students. In particular, by institutionalizing changes that are good for all, students traditionally disadvantaged in doctoral programs will be especially assisted. This is for two reasons. First, feelings of entering a new culture disadvantages female, underrepresented minority, and working class students. So creating a supportive environment would especially change their experiences. Secondly, tacit knowledge is often transmitted through informal networks, such as old boy networks. By providing this information and teaching the skills in formalized settings, students otherwise cut off from these advantageous networks could benefit. With that, let us return to looking at variables which influence graduate student careers.

Data from other domains suggest that beginnings are important for graduate student careers. Research on undergraduates, new faculty, and manager trainees has found a relationship between early experiences and later persistence, satisfaction, and productivity (Boice, 1993; Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1993; London & Bray, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In fact, industrial organizational researchers have underscored the importance of the first year, calling it the "critical period for learning" about an organization (Berlew & Hall, 1966, p. 222). Thus we will focus on the early experiences of graduate students, newcomers to the professoriate.

Boice addressed the behaviors that distinguish well-faring newcomers from their peers. From his studies with new faculty and based on involvement theory popularized with undergraduates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), Boice developed a model which identified elements of good beginnings (Boice, 1993). He extracted four interdependent elements of involvement, or socialization skills, that seemed to distinguish exemplary new faculty from their less successful peers: immersion; regimen; social management; and, self-management.

While focusing on the departmental climates and socialization skills of incoming graduate students, we were interested in variables that could be modified, with the help of administrators, or taught, via seminars. This helped narrow the focus of our investigation. For instance, graduate students moving with spouses or who enter with prior research experience fare better (Bauer & Green, 1994; Goplerud, 1980). Directly studying these variables again would not help the students already in their first years, these factors would already have been predetermined. But we could study what students entering with research

experience see to do different from their peers. Then perhaps the skill and behaviors they employ could be transportable to their peers, even if prior experiences cannot be. And in particular, what departments do that can help graduate students engage in advantageous behaviors.

We investigated how the structure of good beginnings and departmental climates apply to the early experiences of graduate students. We reviewed the graduate student literature to determine whether it is a feasible model. Below is a brief overview of evidence that the current literature can be applied within this four-element model.

Review. Girves and Wemmerus (1988) found that *immersion* in research activities was one element of involvement that predicted degree success for doctoral students. *Regimen* and planning are strong predictors of scholarly productivity for graduate students. Involvement in a structured writing program results in students meeting departmental deadlines for completing masters theses and doctoral dissertations (Dillon & Malott, 1981). Doctoral students who self-regulated their programs to have the most regimented and planful schedules were the students who finished degrees in timely fashion (Welsh, 1981). For *social management*, graduate research assistants who had intense professional interactions with supervisors had greater research productivity compared with their peers (Malaney, 1988). Graduate students who reported having a number of faculty colleagues and being treated like a "junior" colleague by ones' advisor made better degree progress (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988). Not only does social management influence productivity and degree progress, it also influences mental and physical well-being. Students who engaged in more

interactions with faculty outside of classrooms during the first few weeks of school reported less major life disruptions at the six month point of graduate study (Goplerud, 1980). We found that few studies of graduate students addressed *self-management* directly. One article that considered risk-taking, communication skills, and political skills (all related to self-management) was set within a mentoring relationship context. Bova and Phillips' review (1984) found that graduate students and business professionals learned the three aforementioned skills from mentors. So it seems that self-management skills can be taught through informal professional relationships. It may even be that students enter graduate school with self-management skills, having learned them from parents with professional or academic backgrounds. This would help explain why personality and background characteristics, along with departmental characteristics, continue to be important predictors of graduate student progress (Anderson & Louis, 1994; Baird, 1990; Smart & Hagedon, 1994; Stricker, 1994).

Finally, while this model applies to the research on graduate students, we wanted to determine its usefulness in systematically reviewing the early experiences of graduate students. Evidence suggests that the graduate student tasks and self-concepts change over time (Hurtado, 1994), with researchers suggesting that the first-year holds unique challenges for these students (Tinto, 1993). Therefore, we wanted to apply this model to the first-year experiences of graduate students.

Method

Study Methodology

We chose the study methodology with three goals in mind. The first was to get actual reports of first semester experiences. Therefore instead of utilizing retrospective self-report data, we ran a prospective study which interviewed students at three time points in their first year. Second, we wanted to test whether the model of good beginnings would help distinguish the experiences of successful graduate students from their peers. We identified successful students (a) by having graduate directors evaluate progress of the first-year students in the sample, (b) with students' self-reports of their first-years, and (c) by using a measure of time usage and purpose that has been related to academic achievement, mental and physical well being (Bond & Feather, 1988).

What is also notable about the research methodology is the interview component. Already we know from the graduate student literature variables that influence development and timely completion of degrees. For instance, we know informal interactions with professors and the reputation of faculty are associated with time-to-degree (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; the reputation of faculty, Baird, 1990). What we wanted to know is how do these relationships translate into the actual experiences of graduate students. In other words, were a graduate director to ask what can I do to improve graduate student training within my department?, we wanted to identify tangible and transportable suggestions.

Sample. Forty first-year gradate students at a Research I university volunteered for participation in this study. The sample includes students from the hard sciences, social

sciences, and humanities. In addition, we interviewed both graduate directors and two advanced graduate students in the departments where there were three or more graduate student in the sample.

Results

Having concluded the interview of a graduate director, I mentioned to him I really enjoyed interviewing his department, it seemed to be a "happy" department to me. With that, he proudly pulled an article off his shelf. He told me his department was the only one in the university in the top 10 best departments in the nation. Based on that situation, and for the purposes of this conference, we will present a narrow portion of the data. We will present the departmental climates, the tangibles aspects of these climates as set by the department administration. And we will comment on how these climates foster involvement from its graduate students.

Thus, the top rated department and the lowest rated department, as rated by the National Research Council and reported in the Chroncile of Higher Education, will be presented.

As implied in the previous anecdote, the top rated department has a particular climate as created by administrative events. First, while most department in my sample sponsored one or two informal social events for faculty and students, this department sponsored 42. They has three opportunities weekly for incoming students to interact with faculty. The most notable is a weekly dinner hosted by each faculty member. Only first year students are invited. The faculty host presents their research interests and current projects.

Along with fostering informal interactions between faculty and incoming students, they helped interactions amongst the students themselves. All incoming students were assigned to one large office. Since they were mostly in the same courses, this helped cohort cohesion and facilitate group study. This was a technique used by four of the ten investigated departments.

In addition to fostering social management, the departmental environment fosters early immersion in research. Incoming students are assigned advisors, often based on similar research interests. Students are expected to have their first program requirement completed by the beginning of their second year. The requirement is based on research they completed during the first year. From the start, these students are looking for research opportunities and compatible research advisors. Within the advisee-advisor relationship, most of the students had daily contact with advisors. An open door policy was described by the students, and witnessed by the interviewer. Faculty doors were wide open during the days.

Both social management and regimen were directly influenced by the departmental climate. These may be the most important for first year graduate students. Tinto (1993) speculated that integration was the developmental task of the first year of graduate school. And social interactions with peers and faculty enhanced integration.

Compare this with the departmental climate and activities of a lower rated department in the university. Compared with 42 opportunities for informal interactions with faculty, this department sponsored one. This occurred at the beginning of the year, and that was it. Secondly, this department did not provide a central office for all its first year graduate

students. In fact, it did not provide office for its first year students. This was the result of lack of available space, something well outside the bailiwick of the graduate director. The result was a lack of collegial spirit amongst the first year students.

Finally, the students in these departments were not assigned individual advisors during their first year. However, there was a faculty appointed as faculty advisor for the class. Regular appointments with this faculty member were not set up for the students other than one meeting a semester to discuss course choices. And scholarly activity did not start nor was expected to start this year, nor the next for that matter.

While this situation would allow for students to excel, it takes more resourcefulness and proactivity on the students to do so. The result of this is the students already enculterated into academic environments fare much better compared with the other students. This means they either entered with a masters degree or through family members understand the university values and mission. In contrast, the students entering the first department also have an advantage if they are familiar with academic environments. Yet, because of the collegial and supportive departmental culture, it seems to disadvantage the less knowledgeable students less.

Conclusion and Suggestions

For the purposes of this presentation, we identified ways that exemplary departments are distinguished. While we would eventually like to see every department create supportive environments and effective professional socialization seminars, we know from education reform that (1) reform comes slowly. And (2) that lasting and widespread change initially

comes from those interested and motivated to make the changes. Then when the success of the changes can be quantified and it is persuasive, then widespread change can be implemented. In contrast, when change occurs without first recruiting advocates who benefit from the change and forcing change down people's throats, the ultimate result is usually resistance and maintenance of the status quo.

So, how do we motivate graduate department and graduate schools to create supportive environments and offer professional socialization training? To answer this, I look to the health psychology, the teaching development, and the writing development literatures. Behavioral change is preceded by contemplation and self-monitoring of behaviors one desires to change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982). For instance, one of the initial steps in getting novice writer to engage in regular writing sessions is to have them keep track of their existing writing schedules and habits (Boyle & Boice, 1995). Likewise, asking teaching mentoring pairs to monitor their weekly meetings helps keep them focused on teaching issues and maintains involvement and interest in the mentoring program (Boyle, Rothenberg, & Boice, 1995).

Likewise, we suggest that graduate departments self-monitoring their own progress. Each graduate department would be required to calculate their TTDs and completion rates. Then these numbers should be publicly posted and circulated as common knowledge. Additionally, faculty advisors would likewise calculate their TTDs and completion rates. Likewise, these would be posted and made available to prospective advisees. Those departments and advisors could initially be rewarded with additional TA lines and advisees.

We started off by suggesting that graduate education warrants further examination, particularly the beginnings of graduate education. We identified ways graduate departments foster their own success and the success of their students. In particular, we identified tangible easily applied methods which foster collegiality and immersion amongst the graduate students.

Finally, we acknowledged education reform occurs slowly. Thus we suggested some preliminary ways to start the reform. Particularly through a system of self-monitoring outputs, we could raise interest in completion rates a nd length to degrees by department administrators. Ultimately, we hope these initial steps would motivate departments to seek out ways to improve their departments, and get students graduated in timely fashion.

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